



Committee On Finance

Max Baucus, Ranking Member

NEWS RELEASE

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Baucus Works to End to Cuba Travel Ban

Hundreds of Americans Gather to Participate in "Cuba Action Day"

(WASHINGTON, D.C.) Hundreds of Americans from all over the country gathered today to participate in "Cuba Action Day," a forum taking place in Washington, D.C., and all across the nation calling for an end to the Cuba travel ban.

U.S. Senator Max Baucus has been a leading advocate of easing trade and travel restrictions to the island nation. Earlier this week, Baucus joined Senators Enzi and Dorgan to introduce the Freedom to Travel to Cuba Act (S.894), a bipartisan bill to repeal the travel ban to Cuba. Baucus prepared the following remarks for "Cuba Action Day":

Speech of Senator Max Baucus "Planning Our Own Transition" Cuba Action Day

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to all of you. I know that many of you have traveled from far away to be here. I want also to thank the panelists here today. You each have important perspectives to share.

The perspective I want to share with you today is how we can plan a transition: A transition away from the Administration's failed policies.

THE ADMINISTRATION'S "TRANSITION PLAN"

I'm sure you recall, nearly one year ago, President Bush endorsed a lofty plan to "hasten Cuba's transition" devised by a blue ribbon Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba.

The commission laid plans to cut off most U.S. travel to the island, ramp up U.S. broadcasts to the island via taxpayer-funded military plane, and increase aid that most dissidents in Cuba don't even want.

Even some of Castro's staunchest internal critics cast a skeptical eye. Oswaldo Paya, a leading Cuban dissident, dismissed the plan. "It is not appropriate or acceptable for any force outside Cuba to try to design the Cuban transition process," he insisted.

This is much the same message that Paya gave me when I visited his home nearly a year and a half ago.

Vladimiro Roca, a former political prisoner living in Cuba, also expressed doubts. "I'm a practical person," he said. "If in more than forty year [the embargo] hasn't brought results, it won't bring them now."

So, what went wrong with the President's plan to "hasten the Cuban transition?" Maybe Miriam Leiva— whose husband was rounded up in a dissident crackdown two years ago— explained it when she asked:

"[Did] the Bush administration ask for the opinion of internal dissidents when the Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba crafted its report? No. Will the measures hurt the Castro regime? No. Instead, the Cuban people will suffer from the effects of the measures, and more political dissidents could be sent to prison."

OUR OWN TRANSITION

The Administration's transition plan for Cuba is nothing more than the usual pandering to a strident minority. So it is time to plan our own transition, away from the failed policies of the past. In contrast, our transition will be cost-effective common sense.

First, we should engage in good old-fashioned citizen diplomacy, rather than spending tens of millions of taxpayer dollars to broadcast a message to the Cuban people that all of you here could deliver for free.

Second, we must stop ignoring U.S. political and economic interests on the island and in the hemisphere.

Finally, we must lead by example. We cannot credibly urge freedom for others if we don't even respect our own citizens' most fundamental right to travel wherever they want.

CITIZEN DIPLOMACY

During the twilight of the Cold War with the Soviet Union, it was President Reagan who told us that "civilized people everywhere have a stake in keeping contacts, communication, and creativity as broad, deep, and free as possible." He insisted that, "The way governments can best promote contacts among people is by not standing in the way."

I couldn't agree more. So let us send our teachers and students, our farmers and pharmacists, our architects and engineers, all of them citizen diplomats.

Let us not be the ones to bar the Cuban people from participating in the global community. Let the Cuban government just try to defend against an onslaught of American values and goodwill.

CUBAN AMERICAN FAMILY TRAVEL

But that is not enough. We should also send the hundreds of thousands of Cuban Americans who want to take a message of hope and solidarity to their families on the island.

No one can take that message to the Cuban people now, because the Administration has barred Cuban Americans from visiting their loved ones more than once every three years. Such inhumane restrictions on family travel are tearing the Cuban family apart.

Sergeant Carlos Lazo, who is here today, knows what I am talking about all too well. Sergeant Lazo served this nation honorably on a one-year deployment in Iraq this last year.

But when he tried to use his two-week military leave to visit his two sons in Cuba, the U.S. government turned him away just days before the new restrictions took effect. Surely these are not the family values for which America stands.

And far from bringing down the Castro regime, as the Administration promised, such isolationist policies merely reinforce Castro's monopoly on information on the island.

PEOPLE-TO-PEOPLE AND ACADEMIC EXCHANGES

The Cuban people are eager to meet Americans. They love to discuss baseball, debate politics, and engage in academic or professional exchanges with us. These are the very civil society contacts that the Cuban people desperately need, yet these are precisely the contacts that the U.S. government has undermined by cutting off people-to-people and academic exchanges. That's just dead wrong.

PROTECTING U.S. INTERESTS

The trouble is, when we cut off our contacts with a country just ninety miles from our shores, we are not only hurting the Cuban people; we are harming our own interests. When we relinquish our sphere of influence in Cuba, we invite other countries to make their own investments in our absence.

The second part of our transition on Cuba would remove this self-imposed handicap and finally take account of U.S. political and economic interests on the island and in the hemisphere.

While America sits on the sidelines, China is launching a nearly \$2 billion dollar investment in Cuban nickel production. Cuba sits on the third largest nickel deposit in the world.

The Chinese have also given generous credits and donations to Cuba, including helping to upgrade tourist enclaves, making good on a Chinese pledge to turn Cuba into China's premier tourism destination.

While America sits on the sidelines, Spain, Brazil, Canada—and yes, China—have all been busy drilling for oil off the coast of Cuba. Just this past winter, Castro announced that one find would produce 100 million barrels of oil.

It's a modest discovery, but it's another significant sign that wishful thinking and unilateral isolation have not bankrupted Castro's coffers. In the meantime, Venezuela's Hugo Chavez continues to sell cut-rate oil to Cuba in exchange for medical assistance.

The day that change does come to Cuba—and it will come—China, Venezuela, Brazil, Spain, and Canada are the nations that will help shape the Cuban economy, civil society, and political evolution. Are we content to let China become Castro's next patron?

I say no. Our transition plan must actively and honestly protect U.S. interests.

AGRICULTURAL TRADE

I am a realist. I understand that this is an incremental process. So we should start where it makes most sense. Until recently, there was one area where we seemed to have our Cuba policy right – agricultural exports.

Since Congress first authorized one-way, cash-only sales of agricultural products to Cuba in 2000, the island went from being our 226th agricultural export market – dead last – to our 25th largest agricultural export market in 2004. Last year alone, Cuba was worth nearly \$400 million to U.S. exporters.

But here, too, the Administration decided to interfere to cater to the anti-Cuba zealots. Seeing how U.S. ag sales to Cuba were growing, the Treasury Department issued a new rule that would essentially cut off access to the Cuban market by restricting the terms of payment.

This new rule endangers over \$200 million in open contracts negotiated months ago—including sales of Montana wheat and beans. Now these sales will have to be re-negotiated or abandoned.

The bureaucrats at Treasury have no right to close off what Congress purposefully opened. With our farmers and ranchers facing mounting pressure from a shrinking ag trade surplus and the budget axe, this is no time to be closing off promising new markets.

Months ago, I warned against any new restrictions on ag trade to Cuba. I promised to block consideration of significant Treasury nominees that come before the Senate until I feel sure that ag sales to Cuba can continue as they have for the past several years. I intend to keep that promise.

FREEDOM TO TRAVEL TO CUBA ACT

Finally, the keystone of our transition plan must be our willingness to lead by example. Two days ago, Senators Enzi, Dorgan and I introduced the Freedom to Travel to Cuba Act (S.894), a bipartisan bill to repeal the travel ban to Cuba. We did this because we believe all Americans have a fundamental right to travel wherever we want.

Last Congress, our bill was successfully voted out of the Foreign Relations Committee. And the full Senate voted by a clear majority to de-fund enforcement of the travel ban.

The momentum is ours, and everyone knows it.

CONCLUSION

Let me leave you with an observation from two people who know what it means to struggle for freedom. Just after the demoralizing dissident crackdown in 2003, two leading Cuban human rights activists, Elizardo Sanchez and Vladimiro Roca, got to the very heart of what freedom means, even in America. This is what they had to say:

“Just as we insist on the right of Cubans to travel, to leave and return to our country freely, a right now denied us, so too do we support the right of Americans to travel freely, including travel to Cuba.”

Let’s all keep their words in mind as we work to achieve greater freedom of travel for both ourselves and for the Cuban people.

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